

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Immediate Release December 6, 1974

Parker 202/343-5634

ILLEGAL MIGRATORY BIRD FEATHERS AND PARTS SEIZED IN 10 STATES BY U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SPECIAL AGENTS

In a series of coordinated raids in 10 States, Special Agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have seized thousands of eagle and migratory bird feathers, dozens of eagle and migratory bird carcasses, and hundreds of American Indian curios made with parts of federally-protected birds, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Nathaniel P. Reed announced today.

More than 60 individuals, operating independently, were either arrested or issued summonses for trafficking in eagles and migratory birds. Most of those cited were non-Indians, and were charged with selling prohibited items largely to tourists, and collectors in violation of Federal laws forbidding all commercial activities involving eagles and migratory birds. The operation was the largest of its kind in the history of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The point I would most like to emphasize," Reed said, "is that non-Indians are the ultimate market for these parts and feathers of protected birds. There is absolutely no intention to interfere with American Indian religious or ceremonial activities. We intend to prosecute those people whose dealings for profit lead to the needless killing of creatures protected by law, including the bald eagle, our endangered national symbol."

The searches and seizures took place in homes, curio shops, businesses, pawn shops, Indian artifact stores, and numerous small retail outlets. Geographical areas involved include Muncie, Ind.; Chicago and Caseyville, Ill.; Wisconsin Dells, Wisc.; Minneapolis, Minn.; Rapid City, S.D.; Pueblo, Colo.; Riverton, Lander, and Pavillion, Wyo.; Pocatello, Idaho; Ashland and St. Ignatius, Mont.; and Pendleton, Oreg.

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Agents seized freshly killed eagle and hawk carcasses, along with wings, claws, feet, and feathers of these and other birds.

Manufactured articles seized included mounted birds, headresses, pipes, necklaces, dolls, spears, bustles, and hundreds of other curios decorated with feathers. Agents also seized a large number of records.

As the popularity of American Indian artifacts has increased in recent years, a lucrative market has developed for the eagle and migratory bird parts and feathers used to decorate many Indian curios. Eagle carcasses currently sell on the black market for as much as \$175, with hawk carcasses commanding as much as \$45.

Wing and tail feathers are used to make war bonnets, and to decorate wearing apparel and other articles. Most bonnets and headresses sell in the \$400-\$700 price range, but some have been offered for sale for as much as \$1,500. It takes the feathers of as many as 10 eagles to make some types of bonnets.

While Federal law expressly prohibits commercial activities involving eagles and migratory birds, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issues eagle parts and feathers free to Indians by special permit for bona fide tribal religious ceremonies. The Department of the Interior maintains a repository where the remains of eagles that are killed by accident or die naturally are stored for such free distribution.

Over two dozen species of protected birds--including bald and golden eagles--were involved. Some of the feathers seized by Agents apparently had been trimmed or otherwise altered to disguise their true identity or to make them look old.

"We hope that through enforcement actions like this we can control and discourage the senseless killing of eagles and migratory birds for monetary gain," Assistant Secretary Reed said.

Within the last year, the Fish and Wildlife Service has intensified its investigations of commercial traffic involving eagles and migratory birds. Last April, over 40,000 feathers were seized in Oklahoma, with 24 persons cited for selling. Several of the arrests made today were the result of investigations initiated two years ago and required a considerable amount of undercover work.

"The reason that Congress has prohibited the sale, trade, or purchase of feathered Indian artifacts," Reed said, "stems from the fact that any traffic in protected species invariably increases the pressure on surviving members of the population as individuals seek to prolong and increase the commerce."

The Bald Eagle Protection Act carries a maximum criminal penalty of a \$5,000 fine and one year in jail for first offenses. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act provides for a \$2,000 fine and two years in jail for persons convicted of selling protected birds.